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ABSTRACT

Noting that daytime television serials have been used to teach a variety of subjects, including writing and language skills, this paper reviews literature on the nature of soap operas so that instructors can use them more effectively. Following an introduction citing studies on the educational uses of soap operas, the paper explores the following components of these serials: the audiences and their reasons for viewing soap operas, the basic plot structures, general demographics of characters, female characters, black characters, elderly characters, relationships between characters, and the use of time. The paper concludes with a 7 page bibliography of books and articles dealing with soap operas and education. (HTH)

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THE SOAP OPERA: A CRASH COURSE FOR EDUCATORS

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INTRODUCTION; THE EDUCATIONAL USES OF SOAP OPERAS

Daytime television serials have been used to teach a great variety of subjects. Some have used the soap operas which are broadcast everyday, while others have custom made soap operas to teach selected information. Before the soap opera is used to a greater extent, it is necessary to review the literature to understand what they are and what they do.

Language education has utilized the soap opera technique for many programs. Handscombe (1971) noted the usefulness of the soap opera format in teaching Canadian English to non-English speaking individuals. Cheng (1976), in a unique application of the theory, proposed using the soap opera format to teach oral Chinese language skills. Heaton (1977) applied the technique to the teaching of English to adults in the United States. Wierenga (1979) extended the use of the soap opera to the learning of foreign languages.

In addition, the soap opera has been used to teach critical writing and thinking. LaPota (1973) suggested the use of the soap opera to increase verbal literacy and listening skills; Colasurdo (1981) had students examine the soap opera critically; Migeot (1983) extended the use to include the actual writing and production of a soap opera; Wilson (1983) used daytime dramas with journalism students;

Magistral (1984) employed them as a stimulus to creative writing assignments.

Furthermore, the soap opera has been used to teach skills in many areas, including women's studies (Fellman, 1978); sociology (Levinson, 1980); sex education (Sparski and Lynch 1974 and Sullivan, 1979). They have been used to increase the comprehension of emotions and social relationships with learning disabled children (Pearl, 1982) as well as with adult education groups (Niemi, 1972 and Black, 1975).

Mendelsohn (1968) utilized the techniques of a soap opera to educate the urban poor by providing helpful information about problems in their everyday lives through created soap operas. This was one of the first uses, and one of the most unique.

Clearly, soap operas can be useful in education. This paper has been designed as a primer on the background research; with this information, the instructor can utilize the soap opera more concretely.

THE AUDIENCE OF SOAP OPERAS

According to Katzman (1972), the soap opera's audience is made up of mostly women, of which the majority is in the South. It was noted that the higher the income of the person, the less likely that that person would be a soap opera viewer.

Compesi (1976) discovered that the most popular reason for watching soap operas was entertainment. Men rated amusement highly as a reason, while women favored the exploration of reality and the reception of advice as chief reasons. Breen (1980) found that the two most prominent reasons for watchinng soap operas were their intrigueing pluts and their use as topics of conversations.

Bond (1980) stated that there was a relationship between the viewer and their professed values. "The greater the artificial relationship between the viewer and soap opera character, the higher the liberal values ranking the viewer will assign characters (and) the greater the viewer's uses and gratifications, the higher the liberal values ranking the viewer will assign soap opera characters."

Buerkel-Rothfuss (1981) noted a relationship between the viewing of soap operas and the viewer's perception of the number of professionals (doctors, etc) and problems (divorce, abortion, crime, etc). On the other hand, Greenberg (1983)

found conflicting evidence: the viewing of soap operas has no influence on the viewer's perception of real world sexual activity and permissiveness.

The viewing of soap operas has been shown to have both positive and negative effects: Thomas (1977) discovered a positive socializing effect on viewers; Phillips (1982) noted a relationship between violence on soap operas and suicides.

SOAP OPERA PLOTS

The plot of a soap opera, according to Aldrich (1975) is comprised of a series of disasters crowding one another upon the main character(s) in which episodes are independent of each other in terms of time. Katzman (1972) summarized the four basic types of structure in the soap opera:

a. criminal or underworld activities

b. sexual problems

c. medical developments

d. romantic and marital affairs

Derry (1983) specified the plots found in soap operas as:

a. love confronted by obstacles

b. sudden accident or illness

c. personal tensions that result in murder and trial

d. psychotic killer

e. split personality

f. Romeo and Juliet story

g. amnesia

h. bigamy

i. career striving

j. romantic and sexual adventrure

k. slow and drawn out death

The structure of soap opreas, according to Johnson (1978) is filled with repititions, juxtapositions,

interruptions and location changes. Rose (1978) states the techniques used to maintain interest in the plots:

a. varied plots at different stages of development to prevent the story from ever ending

b. juxtaposition of small dramatic scenes

c. though characters often hide the truth, very little is concealed from the audience

In addition, opposing factors are played one against the other in the soap opera: psychological happiness (which is the equivalent of love) and unhappiness (Aldrich, 1975), openness and secrecy, and separateness and merging (Katzman, 1972).

Many problems effect the soap opera characters, including illegitamacy, abortion, divorce, death, love, juvenile delinquency, and social drinking . On the other hand, world and material problems do not exist in the world of the soap opera (Ramsdell, 1973). According to Cassata (1979) two of the most pervasive problems are sickness and injury, but the diseases are usually unspecified. The most commonly specified illness is psychiatric in nature. When death does come on soap operas, it is usually caused by accidents and/or violence.

Drugs, both legal and illegal, were studied. Illegal drugs were much less common than alcohol (MacDonald, 1983). Lowery (1979) found that the use of alcohol was common and

accepted. Garlington noted that alcohol was used in three one minute intervals per 21 minutes of soap opera air time. Lowry (1981) and Greenberg (1981) found that soap operas presented a distorted view of sexual behavior in America. There is over three times as much sexual behavior between unmarried couples as between married couples on the soap operas. Lowry (1981) found that over one fourth of the sexual behavior pictured was of the type discouraged by society. Seiter (1983) suggested several reasons for sexuality to be prominent on the soaps:

a. mildly risquee subject

b. problems can be solved in terms of individual characters

c. there is a degree of sensationalism attached to the subject

d. reasserts the over-riding importance of monogamy

CHARACTERS: GENERAL

Downing (1974) statistically studied the soap opera characters. She found that the characters were nearly evenly divided according to sex, 95% were white, 66% were or had been married, 90% were middle class, 73% were judged good looking, and over 90% were slender and healthy. Seiter (1983) examined the social classes of the characters, finding that characters remain in their own class, despite marriages into other classes (due to the divorce rate on the soap operas). With the working class, there is an emphasis on the key role that work plays in their lives; the middle class shows professionals on the rise; and, of course, there is the upper class.

Kaplan (1973) studied the characters in terms of intimacy and conformity. Characters are preoccupied with conformity due to their knowledge of the proper rules of society. The characters lose status by not conforming and for suffering in their search for intimacy. Modleski (1979) comments that there is really no resolution of problems on soap operas; rather, there are further complications and obstacles.

CHARACTERS: WOMEN

The research reveals that there are a great number of differences between men and women on soap operas. Finz (1975) stated that the male and female characters respond to situations in traditional and stereotypic patterns. Downing (1974) explained that women are generally non-violent and genuinely concerned for others. Furthermore, the women on soap operas tend to be younger than the men. The occupations of women are less clearly defined than those of men; the full time housewife is the largest occupation (29.5%), the professional is second (19.4%) and the clerical is third (9.3%).

BLACKS IN SOAP OPERAS

Johnson (1982) and Bryant-Johnson (1983) agree that Blacks on soap operas are not interesting characters. Johnson states that they are basically boring because they are denied exploits and miseries. Bryant-Johnson states that they are detached from their ethnic background.

The Black characters are presented in ways that are not perceived as threatening to the white world (Bryant-Johnson). Johnson states that there are only four acceptable roles for Blacks in soap operas:

a. sidekick: the Black is a friend who helps a trouble prone white

b. Dear Abbey: the Black gives advice

c. protector: e.g. police

d. true token: these Blacks have no story line or real function, but are simply used to gossip and comment on the action

THE ELDERLY IN SOAP OPERAS

Though the older adult is not the center of plot in soap operas, the genre does not exploit the stereotypes and myths of aging, such as senility (Elliott, 1981). According to Cassata (1980), the older adult is an attractive character, who is employed in an important position and who is living independently. The older adult is more stable emotionally and physically healthier than the younger characters. Elliott (1981) notes that of the older adults portrayed on soap operas, 82.7% are in good health and 75% are from either the middle or upper class.

CHARACTERS: RELATIONSHIPS

Personal happiness motivates relationships which are linked to marriage and the family (Wander, 1979). In general, soap operas openly confront the viewers' concepts of family correctness, and there is, at most, a rare, strong, long lasting commitment to a relationship (Rose, 1978). Abelman (1980), observed that within relationships, unmarried individuals were more sexually active than married individuals. Furthermore, petting was more prevalent among married couples than talk about intercourse. Greenberg (1981) verified the amount of sexual behavior observed in soap operas, and noted that there was more of it on soap operas than on prime time television, though the types of intimacy differed.

Maykovich (1975) compared Japanese and American soap opera families. Japanese soap opera families are based on the concept of continuity while American soap opera families are based on the concept of family love. This difference accounts for the differing focus of each soap opera.

TIME IN SOAP OPERAS

Porter (1977) has defined the soap opera as a "costume drama in a time capsule." Lopata (1977) clarified the concept by noting that time is open ended and expanded. This expansion of time leads to a contraction of space.

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